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ABSTRACT

Language arts programs are sometimes aimless because elementary teachers are not quite sure what is meant by the term "language arts." Often the typical language arts offering lacks a maintenance program which can reinforce learning and correct misinformation. Or, the pupils draw back when usage or mechanics are mentioned because they have previously experienced long sessions of dull practice. Recognition of these factors spurred the development of a Daily Oral Usage program which basically involves writing two incorrect sentences on the board each day. First the incorrect sentences are read by the children so that they can listen for errors. Next they search for errors in punctuation, letter format, verb usage, capitalization, and so on. Pupils then volunteer the needed corrections, identifying the type of error in each case and explaining the need for correction. Finally, the class rereads the corrected sentence to hear the right version. The whole procedure takes a maximum of ten minutes each day. Within this context, the teacher can realize the need for some arbitrary placement of skills. (HOD)

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Coping with the Language Arts Riddle

I chose the title "Coping with the Language Arts Riddle" because of evidence that although most elementary schools have language arts programs, many of these programs are sometimes aimless. I use the term *aimless* because I frequently encounter elementary teachers who are not quite sure what is meant by the term language arts. I remember a time last year when a very bright young lady, a team leader responsible for language arts in her unitized school, proudly handed me what she claimed was an innovative approach. The "program" consisted of a mimeographed booklet each child received. The child entered the books he had read and any themes he might have chosen to do on his own. As a result of this encounter, and many more, especially with new teachers, I have strong suspicions that language arts to most is something too illusive to nail down, to come to terms with in a realistic school setting.

I fear that this lack of knowledge is often due to the type of language arts methods course these people have taken, if they even had to take one. Altogether too often a language arts method course deals mainly with the teaching of reading. Or its only a one-credit course, with not enough time to cover even a small percentage of the language arts spectrum. Even a three-credit course cannot do justice preparing teachers because the course attempts to deal with the strategies of teaching observation, listening, handwriting (perish the thought), spelling, usage, social conventions, speech, vocabulary, organizational skills, mechanics, and literary conventions. It also should include a study of linguistics for the teacher's benefit so he or she will be able to cope with language problems. And above all, the methods course should deal with the teaching of composition. If you have taken such a three-credit course, you realize that no one can hope to cover such a range of skills in so few hours and yet it occurs most of the time in our teacher-training programs.

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I point out this lack of preparation to indicate that teachers cannot be expected to design language arts programs that go beyond the act of teaching reading unless they are trained to recognize the myriad skills an elementary teacher must be able to teach. Perhaps the real fallacy is that we assume that because a person possesses a skill he or she can teach it. This assumption too often underlies the poor training within the language arts area. Being able to write adequately does not require the same talents that are needed to teach composition.

I earlier mentioned that we must go beyond the reading act because language arts is more than just learning to read. It is the total involvement with language: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. If only one aspect exists in a language arts curriculum, then let's call it by its right name and not by another.

Where viable language arts programs have existed, such curriculums, for the most part, have been traditionally structured. Such structure has posed several problems. In most instances the teacher has had to rely on one source to teach the program -- a text that he or she too frequently followed from page one to the end. Work was pursued in blocks: a block of grammar, a block of listening skills, a block of mechanics, a block of usage drill, and a small block of composition. These exposures were all less than adequate. Blank filling that purported to teach correct and permanent usage was also a part of this language study. Nor did the text do an adequate job of explaining certain concepts either to the teacher or to the student. For example, how many texts ever showed children that our irregular verbs can be patterned? Or where did you ever find a text that didn't devote a number of useless pages telling students how to write? Just how many students like to read about writing?

Perhaps the biggest problem that resulted from using one text to teach the language arts program was that it rarely covered the entire language arts spectrum. Teachers didn't realize that such a text represented certain limitations placed upon it by a publisher. And the text also presented only those items that a particular editor envisioned as the language arts bag. These restrictions were not altogether offensive; realistically we cannot do everything. Yet it just might be that the finest commercial series available, while covering some of our pet concepts, also included things we didn't want. Consequently, we probably settled for less than we should have.

I mention these problems because they have produced our riddle -- a riddle that to some teachers continues to remain unsolvable. The result: language arts too frequently becomes a sometime subject, easily displaced when periods need to be shortened or time has to be found for trips to the library or elsewhere.

One way out of this quandry is a rather simplistic one -- only teach language arts skills when they are needed. Don't harass the children with needless skills they'll soon forget anyway. Such has been the approach of some progressive schools of thought. I, myself, have more need of structure, first from a personal standpoint that requires I know where I can start and what is a reasonable goal to achieve with children, and secondly, from a job description that states our district will have an accountable language arts program that is visible and meaningful. I feel that elementary language arts programs can be improved if teachers observe a few simple procedures as they develop new curriculums.

First, decide what you and your school believe to be reachable goals in the areas of language, composition, and literature. List these goals; make sure they are measurable in some fashion. Until you make that decision, you cannot do anything but wallow. As these objectives are arranged in some type of hierarchical order, realize that certain items taught in the early

grades are not always immediately applicable. Nevertheless, these items need to be taught so that other learnings can accrue. For example, initial learning of some linguistic concepts might not be immediately applicable to a student's writing, yet this foundation becomes a part of the student's vocabulary later used when he or she and the teacher discuss writing.

Next, recognize that some of the language arts skills must be taught as skills unto themselves before they can be applied and directed elsewhere. Just as the act of learning to read must precede reading in the various content areas, so must certain language arts skills be set apart, examined, experimented with, and then applied later. The act of learning to write, by its very complex nature, must be divorced at times from everything else until the writer has learned to master an aspect of it. The narrowing of a topic, for instance, is in itself complex enough so that the teacher must stop and teach the narrowing process.

Having decided upon the objectives that need to be taught, then undertake a herculean task. For each of the items listed in your curriculum, supply one or more resources to teach that objective. In supplying these resources, search out the most innovative (and practical, I might hasten to add) materials or, better still, design some of your own. In seeking materials, don't be afraid of commercial ones produced by reputable companies. Select a series that dares to be different, that excites both children and teachers to explore all of the ramifications of language and literature. Within the last three or four years several companies have produced such materials so that you should not hesitate to use texts, provided you realize such materials cannot cover your entire language arts curriculum.

Finally, have faith that the goals set down earlier can be achieved by systematically planning to teach them. Also realize that the teaching of one language arts concept many times leads to the learning of several concomitant ones. Accepting this as a condition makes the language arts objectives

compiled earlier less formidable.

At this point I'd like to stop for a moment to explain that this was the route my district went when we designed a new language arts curriculum. We made our lists, and we searched for materials to help teach this program. In addition we designed many of our own materials. In particular I'd like to share one such program (a small facet of the entire program, by the way) that arose out of a problem most elementary teachers have been aware of for years. The problem was that pupils retain little of whatever usage lessons they are taught. True, children can work hard learning certain mechanical and usage items involving punctuation, capitalization, verb usage, degree, and letter format and prove that they have mastered them immediately after the unit of study. But try having them use the same skills after a month has elapsed, during which time other skills have been taught, and most of what was previously learned has been forgotten.

We have a poor batting average in language arts because we do not have the built-in maintenance program that some other disciplines have. Mathematics is a good illustration of a discipline with built-in maintenance. In mathematics one skill builds upon another. An advanced skill forces the maintenance of skills learned earlier. This continual recall eventually makes any recall almost automatic. In essence pupils are being programmed. While pupils in language arts should strive for this same type of automatic recall, they do not always have such an opportunity for programming themselves. Having learned how to punctuate an appositive or use quotation marks, they quickly forget such rules simply because they usually have no immediate need for the skill. Consequently, what was learned is soon lost. Or if children do have an immediate need for the newly acquired skill, it is a need that infrequently recurs.

Another problem connected with the acquisition of many language arts skills must be recognized. In most disciplines pupils do not acquire misinformation. And if misinformation is acquired, it is normally corrected by peers, parents, or teachers. In the language arts area, however, oral misinformation such as incorrect usage too frequently remains uncorrected simply because parents or peers cannot explain or state clearly what is right or wrong.

Two observations about the teaching of language arts skills led to the development of a *Daily Oral Usage* program. As noted, the typical language arts offering lacks a maintenance program which can reinforce learning and correct misinformation. Second, pupils pull the figurative window shade when usage or mechanics is mentioned because these pupils previously have experienced long sessions of dull practice. Recognition of these factors spurred a committment to design a usage program for the elementary schools which would not tire children but which would provide them with needed programming in short time blocks.

Basically, this *Daily Oral Usage* program involves writing two incorrect sentences on the board each day. First the incorrect sentences are read by the children so they can listen for the errors. Then they search out such errors as punctuation, capitalization, verb usage, letter format, or confusing idiomatic constructions. Next, pupils volunteer the needed corrections so that the teacher or a helper can correct the errors. At this point the pupil identifies the type of error and tells why there is a need for correction. Finally, the class rereads the corrected sentence to hear the right version. (The oral approach is stressed since one learns most about language orally.) The whole procedure takes a maximum of ten minutes a day; the experienced teacher and class manage with approximately five minutes each day.

In each daily lesson several skills might be included, but periodically only one new skill not previously covered will be introduced. As the teacher proceeds with this program, he or she might discover that the class is having a problem with a certain item. It is at this point that the teacher stops to clarify it and to give needed practice in that skill.

This *Daily Oral Usage* has been developed for grades one through six. For each grade level after the first, teachers are provided with enough sentences for thirty-six weeks of work. Each week's material includes ten sentences to use. In grade one the program begins during the eleventh week after most first graders have acquired enough vocabulary recognition to read the sentences. From this beginning in first grade the usage skills are spiraled throughout the six years, with new skills added at each grade level.

We admit that certain arbitrary allocations of skills were made so that there is an even distribution and balance for each grade. Within the context of this program, teachers realize the need for some arbitrary placement of skills. Teachers also use their judgment to introduce skills not found in a particular grade if there is an immediate need for those skills. They also rewrite sentences if a more direct correlation with another subject area can be made. In this case teachers substitute their sentences but retain the skill to be taught.

Ideally, the best examples for any daily oral usage program should come from the use of language in oral and written work in each classroom. But most elementary teachers do not have the time to sequence such daily oral work. A packaged program such as this one, then, does provide for an orderly spiraled sequence of usage that does not leave the teaching and learning of certain skills to chance or the acquisition of them to some mysterious osmotic process.

Since this usage program is oral, all children are expected to participate. Even the slowest pupils can have success. Early in the use of this program, it was discovered that nonachievers soon learned that there is always something

missing at the beginning and at the end of each sentence -- capitalization and punctuation. Wise teachers quickly learned to utilize this finding and to encourage nonachievers to become contributors.

The enthusiasm for this program is seen by pupils demanding their daily sentences to correct, teachers pleased with positive responses, skills being transferred to written and oral work, and pupils and teachers realizing that learning certain skills can be fun.

I might point out that this program by no means assumes that there is but one social dialect. One of the main emphasis in our language arts curriculum is to make students aware of various social dialects. Each student learns that he or she daily uses the home, peer, and school dialects. Our responsibility is to teach students to use the appropriate level at the right time. This facet of our program does not create a dichotomy between usage and creativity; it isn't an either-or situation. Teachers, having used this program, believe that it makes them more aware of the children's speech in the classroom. Problem areas can then be considered, and briefly stressed in the next day's lesson. And as children write, they realize that the first flow of ideas contains possible usage errors, but those can always be corrected during a revision stage.

Earlier I mentioned that no resource can possibly be used to teach all that is needed to be taught in a language arts program. And using multiple materials is not an easy task; it requires much work in blending everything. If your curriculum, however, does indicate resources for each objective, then part of the job -- that of searching out resources -- has been done for you. You can devote your energies to the real job, that of creatively synthesizing these objectives.

In closing, I'd like to remind you that a structured language arts program requires, in addition to the objectives you have determined,

- - a well designed language arts text that will provide a base from which to operate;
- - many teacher copies of materials to be used for gathering ideas for

the teaching of composition;

- - locally produced materials that teach certain skills which commercial texts might exclude;
- - commercial spelling and handwriting programs which sequence and spiral skills unless your district can afford to develop programs as good as many of the commercially prepared ones;
- - audio visual aids, especially at the primary level, to get children to talk, talk, talk before they do any other language arts activities;
- - any other educationally sound materials, such as Peabody kits, that you can plug in when you discover a certain weakness;
- - and most important, a definite time schedule -- proportionate amounts of time for each of the major language arts areas so that children will have a chance at all skills.

When I think of the efforts a good language arts teacher has to expend, I recall one of my favorite stories by a second grader. Timothy wrote: "I want to be a scientist because I want to invent things. I like to do experiments. I want to make an experiment that will make a man strong so he can fight crooks. He will have to take pills to get strong. It is hard to invent things." Yes, it is hard to "invent things" or bring together things that produce satisfying language arts programs, but the task is not insurmountable. There are answers to that riddle.